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ABSTRACT

Perceptions of Australian students studying independently at a distance regarding factors influencing their external studies were compared with attitudes of campus-based students. The 53 distance students and 51 on-campus students were enrolled in three social and political theory courses at Murdoch University. The mean age of the external students was 33 years, with a range from 22 to 57, while the mean age of on-campus students was 26 years, with a range from 17 to 44. Responses were obtained to objective questions and by written open-ended advice to two hypothetical prospective external students. In both sets of responses, students identified family, job and life circumstances as major influences on their university work. The expressed advantages of external study were self-reliance and finances, while disadvantages were related to access to the library and understanding what academics expected. The students expressed preference for studying on campus or by the combination of campus and external courses that was available at the university. It is suggested that the opportunity to work in a mixed mode combination at Murdoch University allows a student to work out a personal adjustment around the perceived advantages and disadvantages of external study. Campus attendance for a limited number of selected courses gives access to university resources that can be applied to courses studied at home. The mixed mode enables students to exercise choice and to fit studies with the contexts of their life circumstances. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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Distance University Students' Perceptions of the Influences on Their Study.

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Abstract

Fifty-three distance students and a comparison group of 51 campus students of university social and political theory courses responded to a written questionnaire on their perceptions of the factors influencing their external studies. Responses were obtained to objective questions and by written open-ended advice to two hypothetical prospective external students.

In both sets of responses students identified family, job and life circumstances as major influences on their university work. The expressed advantages of external study were self-reliance and finances. Disadvantages were related to access to the library and understanding what academics expected.

The students expressed preference for studying on campus or by the combination of campus and external courses which was available at the university. It is suggested that the mixed mode combination provides students with opportunity to exercise choice, make use of university resources, and to fit studies within the contexts of their life circumstances.

Introduction

The peculiarities of external study expose a distance student to a variety of contextual influences which may or may not be conducive to academic work. S/he is removed from campus, and works within an individual environment where academic considerations may not predominate.

How any person processes academic information is influenced by sets of contextual factors which according to Broudy (1977) originate in a student's existential environment and from his or her existing knowledge base. The proposition that individual sets of factors influence how external students learn has been tacitly assumed by distance educators, but there is little empirical evidence of the ways such influences are perceived or dealt with by external students.

External students are removed from constant interaction with and influence by the University community, and this lack of immediate academic support throws them on their own resources, and exposes them to other pressures. It cannot be assumed that students who work individually at a distance will see themselves as studying within the same parameters as those who have easy access to university facilities. Willen (1977), and Dahlöff (1977) have identified the parameters of studying behaviour as "contextual frames" or the physical, social and personal pressures under which distance students operate. They argue that these factors influence a student's level of productivity and the actual way he or she studies.

Combining Broudy's notion of contextual knowing with Willen and Dahlöff's idea of influences on study, we sought to find out the kinds of parameters on study which students would identify.

We were interested to know the kinds of influences and pressures which Australian students at one university perceived as affecting their study of external courses. Were these pressures mainly seen as emanating from their life-settings? Would they choose to study at a distance if it was an option and not a necessity and would they recommend the external students' life to others?

The development of a questionnaire to investigate these questions was guided by a set of basic concerns about external study. First we were interested in the students' choice of the external mode and whether or not it was preferred to campus study. Secondly we wished to find out how students perceived their actual work, the influences on it and the advantages and disadvantages of the external mode.

Boyd and French (1980) had used an earlier version of the questionnaire with 50 enrollees in a college external Bachelor of Education course. They found that their students were more attracted to campus and a combination of campus and external courses than to exclusively external study. They also found that family and job demands were the most significant influences on students' perceptions of their study behaviour. Since their sample was professionally-oriented and had identified employment factors as significant in their initial motivation for enrolment, we were interested in collecting similar responses from university students with more general academic orientation.

In order to be able to include both country and metropolitan students in the external sample, a written questionnaire was designed as a series of forced choice questions plus two hypothetical cases with

open-ended written responses. The addition of the hypothetical cases would provide opportunity for freely-expressed opinions about distance enrolment for comparison with standardised responses.

It was expected that distance students would be able to identify the pressures and influences which affect their study behaviour and that experience of external study would influence perceptions of external study. Therefore a comparison sample of internal students studying the same discipline was asked to respond to a shortened version of the questionnaire and to the hypothetical cases.

Method

Subjects

Two subject samples were comprised of: (1) a stratified sample of 53 external enrollees in three Social and Political Theory courses at an Australian university, and (2) 51 on-campus students enrolled in the same courses. The mean age of the external students was 33 years, with a range from 22 to 57. Mean age of internals was 26 years, with a range from 17 to 44 .

The external sample was 32% of all external students enrolled in the three courses and 44% of those contacted. 14 students had withdrawn from these courses and therefore their data were not processed. The fifty-one on-campus students were an intact class.

Instrument

Objective responses were elicited by questions about (1) students' preferences for studying in external or internal courses, or via the mixture of courses in both modes which is available to Murdoch students, and (2) students' perceptions of the contextual and personal influences on their study. Open-ended advice was elicited with hypothetical cases of two potential external students, a male country school-teacher and

a city housewife. Students' identifications of the advantages and disadvantages of external study were coded according to a taxonomy of eight sources of influence which was developed on thirty pilot questionnaires. The taxonomy is shown in Figure 1. Data were coded by one coder, and 25% were cross-coded independently by a second coder. Eighty-three percent agreement was obtained for 125 separate codings.

INSERT FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

Procedure

External students received the questionnaire by mail, and completed all sections. A form of the questionnaire which omitted the section of influences was administered to an intact internal class by an experimenter.

Results

(1) Preferred mode of study

The majority of the 53 external students indicated that they did not prefer to study externally (.88). They were evenly divided between preference for internal courses, and preference for a mixture of internal and external courses (proportions of .45 and .43 respectively). The distribution of preferences obtained from the external and internal samples were not significantly different, $\chi^2_{(2)} = 4.69$, $p > .05$. A smaller number of the external sample than the internal sample indicated that they preferred to study internally ($.45 > .67$, $z = 2.22$, $p < .05$). Proportions of the two samples preferring external or mixed modes of study were not significantly different, $p > .05$. All comparisons of pairs of proportions were made using Ferguson's (1966) test of independent proportions which yields a z score. Proportional distributions of preferences for the two samples are shown in Table 1(a).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Current enrolment in one Murdoch course does not provide evidence of a student's total university enrolment experience. Therefore the two samples together were divided into three groups according to their university experience of: (1) external courses exclusively, (2) a mixture of external and internal courses, and (3) internal courses exclusively. Preference responses were computed for these three groups.

Only a proportion of .08 of the total sample preferred to study as external students. Internal study was most preferred (.55) followed by mixed mode (.37). Preference for external enrolment was obtained from only proportions of .13 of students with exclusively external experience, .04 of students with mixed mode experience and .05 of students with exclusively internal experience. Distributions of preferences for experience groups are shown in Table 1(b).

Preference for internal courses was obtained from proportions of .37 of students with only external experience, .57 of students with mixed experience, and .71 of students with exclusively internal experience. The mixed mode of study was preferred by .39 of those students who had experience of mixed modes of study, and by half those who had only studied externally (.50) and .24 of those with previous experience of only internal courses. Thus external students were attracted to the possibility of doing some or all of their study on campus, and nearly a quarter of internals said they would like to do some work via external courses.

(2) Advantages and disadvantages of external students

Major proportions of the 53 external students said that externals have the advantage over internals in two regards, (a) self-reliance (.79), and (b) financing study (.57). However high proportions said that externals were disadvantaged in comparison with internals in (c) access to the library (.77), and (d) understanding of the course co-ordinator's demands (.73). The only area of neither advantage nor disadvantage was (e) enjoyment of study, where a proportion of .54 said there was neither advantage nor disadvantage. .31 said externals were advantaged, and .15 said they were disadvantaged. The distribution of responses obtained from 51 internal students was different in only one area, the use of self-reliance $\chi^2_{(2)} = 17.7$, $p < .01$. Otherwise the two groups designated the same areas of advantage and disadvantage for external students. The distributions are shown in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In summary external and internal students said the external student was disadvantaged in access to the library, and in understanding the course co-ordinator's demands, but was advantaged financially. Only the external students saw themselves as advantaged in the area of self-reliance. Nearly half of both groups saw the external student as advantaged in the use of available study time (.47 of external and .49 of internal group).

(3) Influences on Study

The external enrollees rated six possible sources of influence on their own studying behaviour on a one-to-five Likert Scale.

Proportions of external students rating six sources of great or much influence on their study were as follows: (a) family demands, .64, (b) access

to library was rated high, .60, (c) interaction with tutor, .49, (d) job demands, .49, (e) lack of contact with other students, .38 and (f) social and community activities, .17. There were no significant differences between the responses of those students who studied exclusively in the external mode and those who studied in a mixture of external and internal modes, $p>.05$. Proportional distributions of influence ratings obtained from exclusively external and mixed mode students are shown in Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

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(4) Advice to hypothetical prospective students

Advice about the advantages and disadvantages of external study were computed for the total sample since externals and internals gave similar patterns of response. The proportions of the 104 students who expressed each category of advantage and disadvantage were calculated separately for the cases of the teacher and the housewife.

(a) Advantages of External Study

The 104 students expressed 183 individual reasons why the teacher would find advantage in enrolling as an external student, and 165 reasons for the housewife. The proportions of the students expressing the seven categories of advantage were similar for the two cases. Rank orderings of advantages were computed from the proportions of 104 students mentioning each advantage for the teacher and the housewife respectively. The rank ordering of advantages for the teacher was not significantly different from the rank ordering of advantages for the housewife, Kendall's Tau = .048, $p>.05$. Inspection of Figure 2 shows that Self-Direction was the most frequently mentioned advantage for the teacher (by .58 of the sample), and that it was mentioned by .47 for the

housewife. University resources were not mentioned as frequently as personal and circumstantial factors in either case (.18 and .14 respectively).

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Major differences in the advantages mentioned for each case are shown in Figure 3. While a proportion of .43 of the sample expressed advantages for the teacher in terms of his general life circumstances, only .11 made this reference to the housewife. Inversely, while only a proportion of .12 mentioned fitting in with family circumstances, this was the most mentioned source of advantage for the housewife (.55).

(b) Disadvantages of External Study

The 104 students expressed 210 individual disadvantages of external study for the teacher, and 132 for the housewife. The proportions of the students expressing eight categories of disadvantage were similar for the two cases. The rank ordering of disadvantages was not significantly different, Kendall's Tau = .357, $p>.05$. The need for self-direction and organization, the influence of temporal and spatial constraints, and family circumstances were the most frequently mentioned disadvantages for both prospective students, as is shown in Figure 3. Inspection of Figure 3 shows that more students mentioned two areas of disadvantage in relation to the teacher than in relation to the housewife, that is, life circumstances (.32 Vs .05), and university resources (.26 Vs .08).

(c) Enrolment Advice

The students had been asked to advise the hypothetical students on whether or not to enrol as external students. The distribution of enrolment advice responses for the teacher obtained from the 53

externals was significantly different from that of the 51 internals, $\chi^2_{(2)} = 7.87$, $p<.05$. However the distributions of enrolment advice response obtained from the two groups for the housewife were not significantly different, $p>.05$. Proportional distributions of enrolment advice responses for both cases are shown in Table 3(a).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

More external than internal students recommended external enrolment for the teacher (.79>.51 , $z=2.97$, $p<.05$), and for the housewife, (.72>.49, $z=2.40$, $p<.05$). The pattern of advice responses suggested that there might be an interaction between a student's own enrolment experience and his or her recommendations for the hypothetical students. Response patterns were computed for the three experience groups. The proportional distributions of enrolment advice obtained from the three experience groups are shown in Table 3(b).

While the overall distributions of advice responses for the teacher were not significantly different, $p>.05$. A one-way chi-square yielded a significant difference in the number of students in the three experience groups recommending that the teacher enrol externally, $\chi^2_{(2)} = 10.89$, $p<.01$. More exclusively external students recommended enrolment than exclusively internal students, (.79>.48, $z=3.10$, $p<.05$). The proportion of students with mixed mode experience recommending enrolment (.74) was not less than the proportion of exclusively externals, but was greater than the proportion of the exclusively internals (.48, $z=2.16$, $p<.05$).

Similarly, the overall distributions of advice responses for the housewife were not significantly different for the three groups, but there was a significant difference in the distribution of the recommendations to

enrol $\chi^2_{(2)} = 9.84$, $p < .01$. External enrolment was recommended by more exclusively external than exclusively internal students (.82>.57, $z = 2.45$, $p<.05$) but not than mixed mode students (.74). The proportion of mixed mode students was not significantly greater than that of exclusively internal students, $p>.05$.

In summary, the majority of students recommended external study for a country school-teacher and city housewife, and those with experience of external study were more positive about the prospect than those who had studied only in the internal mode. Students gave advice about the advantages and disadvantages of external study which were related to personal direction over one's study and individual life circumstances more than to the resources and facilities provided by the University.

Discussion

We had expected to find that contextual frames and influences on external students' study would be related to the personal parameters of their life circumstances, and to university demands and provisions. One way of finding out about the existence of a set of phenomena is to compare the weightings given to types within the set on several measures. The structured questionnaire allowed students to rate various sources of facilitation and constraint for those studying in the external mode, and to identify major sources of influence in their studying behaviours as external students.

In their objective responses external and internal students identified the advantages of external study in terms of personally directed, organized and perpetuated study, and in terms of financial benefits. The externals considered that their families, jobs and other commitments exerted significant influence on their study behaviour. These university students showed

similar emphases to the college students in Boyd and French's study. Our students, like theirs, saw themselves as having poorer access to library facilities and to university staff and resources. The comparison group of internal students agreed with this assessment. All students focussed their open-ended advice to two hypothetical students on personal contextual frames and on the everyday circumstances in which an external student lives and studies. What the university offered was of far less concern than the way a prospective external student would organize his or her work within the bounds of family and other on-going commitments. Their orientation was personalized. This finding is supported by Sansom's (1981) survey of student's reasons for withdrawing from the university. She found that students who had studied externally mentioned personal and employment considerations as their reasons more often than internals who complained about their experiences at university and their poor motivation.

It would appear that there are two levels of contextual frames. The student brings with him or her a set of frames such as family responsibility and commitments, job and social responsibilities. Once s/he becomes a student another set of study related contexts comes into operation, that is, a relationship with university staff and a dependency on university provisions and facilities. However, these university-based factors were not rated above family and job commitments in the objective responses and were not given great attention in the advice to the hypothetical students.

The data suggest that the first set of frames which relate to the student's life circumstances remain of paramount importance. University-related contextual factors may then be subsumed into the pre-existing frames of the student's life. Students saw the distance mode as allowing them to exercise personal direction over their work. It permitted them to fit study in with other pressing commitments.

This emphasis on self-direction in external study is interesting in the light of the strong tendency to reject a wholly external university experience. While it is unwise to draw too many inferences about objective responses, it is legitimate to ask what factors were underlying the pattern of enrolment preferences, especially since the choice of mode question was asked prior to questions about perceptions of the factors which influence external study. There are several indicators of how to interpret the seeming disparities of mode preferences and the advantages of external study. Firstly the preference question specifically asked for choice of mode if all constraints were removed. This may have led students to visualize an ideal world. The question would need to be rephrased and new data collected to compare with our findings. It should also be noted that self-direction was seen as a burden as well as a benefit in the advice to prospective students. If the external student becomes distracted, there is no necessary weekly confrontation with the tutor or with the substance of the course. "Organize your semester's work" and "plan around assignment dates" were constant warnings to the novices. A unique feature of study at Murdoch University is the opportunity to work in the mixed mode combination, and this provision allows a student to work out a personal adjustment around the perceived advantages and disadvantages of external study. Campus attendance for a limited number of selected courses gives access to university resources which can be fed into courses studied at home. One may use the library and exploit the availability of campus academics.

There is need for further research on the way students actually organize and execute their studies within the personal contextual factors which we have identified. Dodds and Lawrence (1979) made a start by showing how four women external students actually organized their course work in the kind of way that the present data would predict. They expressed

greater interest in the immediate relevance and practical application of their education studies than in the course coordinator's plans for an integrated package of study. They verbalized their plans to concentrate on the aspects of the course which interested them, or which they could use in their teaching. If study is not a major pre-occupation of distance students, and if it has to be fitted into full and demanding life-styles, then students are more likely to be selective in their organization of work. While our students advocated organizing study programmes around family, job or community commitments, the Dodds and Lawrence sample also selected the academic material which could be most easily accommodated to contextual factors. The extra reliance on individual direction afforded by the distance condition of study was clearly exercised.

The generalizability of our findings may be limited by the possibility of mixed mode study which was available to our subjects. However this option in itself may become more attractive to distance educators in light of the problems of student funding and job opportunities, and in view of its perceived usefulness to a third of our students, and to a similar proportion of Boyd and French's college sample.

We have tried to overcome the constraints of an objective questionnaire by introducing the use of hypothetical cases which provide means of obtaining open-ended, oblique perspectives from students who could not be contacted in person. While criticism could be levelled at the loading of particular factors in the two cases, and the possibility of order effects and confounding, our cases were chosen as typical examples of adult distance students. Refinements of the instrument such as varying sex and situation can be carried out together with the generation of further cases. The responses to these initial cases suggest that it is useful to extend the use of the methodology to other hypothetical cases of students with differing contextual frames.

The questionnaire and hypothetical cases elicited information about external students' perceptions which is sparse in the research literature. The current climate of increasing interest in external studies in Australia makes it an opportune time for university educators to examine some of the major factors which influence why and how students study in that mode. What is needed is a body of empirical evidence about the situational and intellectual contexts in which distance students work. This study provides some useful indicators for the direction of further research.

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Table 1(a)

Preferences for Three Modes of Study Obtained

From External and Internal Samples

	Preferred Mode of Study			
SAMPLE:	External	Mixed Mode	Internal	η
External	.11	.43	.45	53
Internal	.04	.29	.67	51

Table 1(b)

Preferences for Three Modes of Study Obtained

From Students with Experience of Exclusively External,

Exclusively Internal and Mixed Mode Enrolment

	Preferred Mode of Study			
EXPERIENCE GROUP:	External	Mixed Mode	Internal	η
Exclusively External	.13	.50	.37	38
Mixed Mode	.04	.39	.57	42
Exclusively Internal	.05	.24	.71	23

Table 2 : Proportional Distributions of External and Internal Groups' Ratings of Advantages and Disadvantages of External Study

CATEGORIES	ADVANTAGE	NEITHER	DISADVANTAGE
SELF-RELIANCE			
External	.79)*	.15	.06
Internal	.39)	.39	.22
FINANCING STUDY			
External	.57	.38	.06
Internal	.60	.29	.10
USING STUDY TIME			
External	.47	.17	.36
Internal	.49	.29	.22
ENJOYING STUDY			
External	.31	.54	.15
Internal	.21	.55	.23
ACCESS TO LIBRARY			
External	.06	.17	.77
Internal	.04	.22	.74
UNDERSTANDING COURSE COORDINATOR'S DEMANDS			
External	.04	.24	.73
Internal	.04	.18	.78

* Sig. at $p<.05$.

Table 3 : Proportional Distributions of Enrolment Advice to Hypothetical Prospective Enrolees

(a) OBTAINED FROM EXTERNAL Vs INTERNAL SAMPLES

ADVICE:	PROSPECTIVE ENROLLEES Male Country School Teacher	Female City Housewife
ENROL		
External	.79[a]	.72[b]
Internal	.51[a]	.49[b]
DON'T ENROL		
External	.11	.11
Internal	.08	.24
UNSURE		
External	.09[c]	.17
Internal	.41[c]	.27

(b) OBTAINED FROM EXPERIENCE GROUPS

ADVICE:		
ENROL		
Exclusively External	.79[d]	.82[f]
Mixed Mode	.74[e]	.74
Exclusively Internal	.48[d, e]	.57[f]
DON'T ENROL		
Exclusively External	.11	.03
Mixed Mode	.09	.04
Exclusively Internal	.07	.17
UNSURE		
Exclusively External	.11[g]	.16
Mixed Mode	.17[h]	.22
Exclusively Internal	.45[g, h]	.26

Key: a to h indicates pairs of proportions Sig. at $p<.05$.

FIGURE 1: TAXONOMY OF TYPES OF ADVICE FOR PROSPECTIVE EXTERNAL STUDENTS, EXPRESSED AS:

SOURCE OF ADVICE:	Advantage	Disadvantage
self-direction and organization	allows self-directed and self-paced study	lack of support, feedback, unsuitable study environment
motivation and affective domain	enables intellectual stimulation, sense of achievement	need for high level of self-discipline, commitment
family circumstances	permits coordination with family commitments	conflict with family responsibility, commitments
general life circumstances	permits coordination with work and life commitments	conflict with work and other commitments
physical and temporal environment	enables best use of time, overcomes physical restrictions	isolation from staff, students, campus
vocational and educational domain	provides access to advancement qualifications	difficulty of university studies
university resources and facilities	permits access to human and organizational resources	limited availability of resources esp. library
attitudes of others	approved by significant others	disapproval of significant others

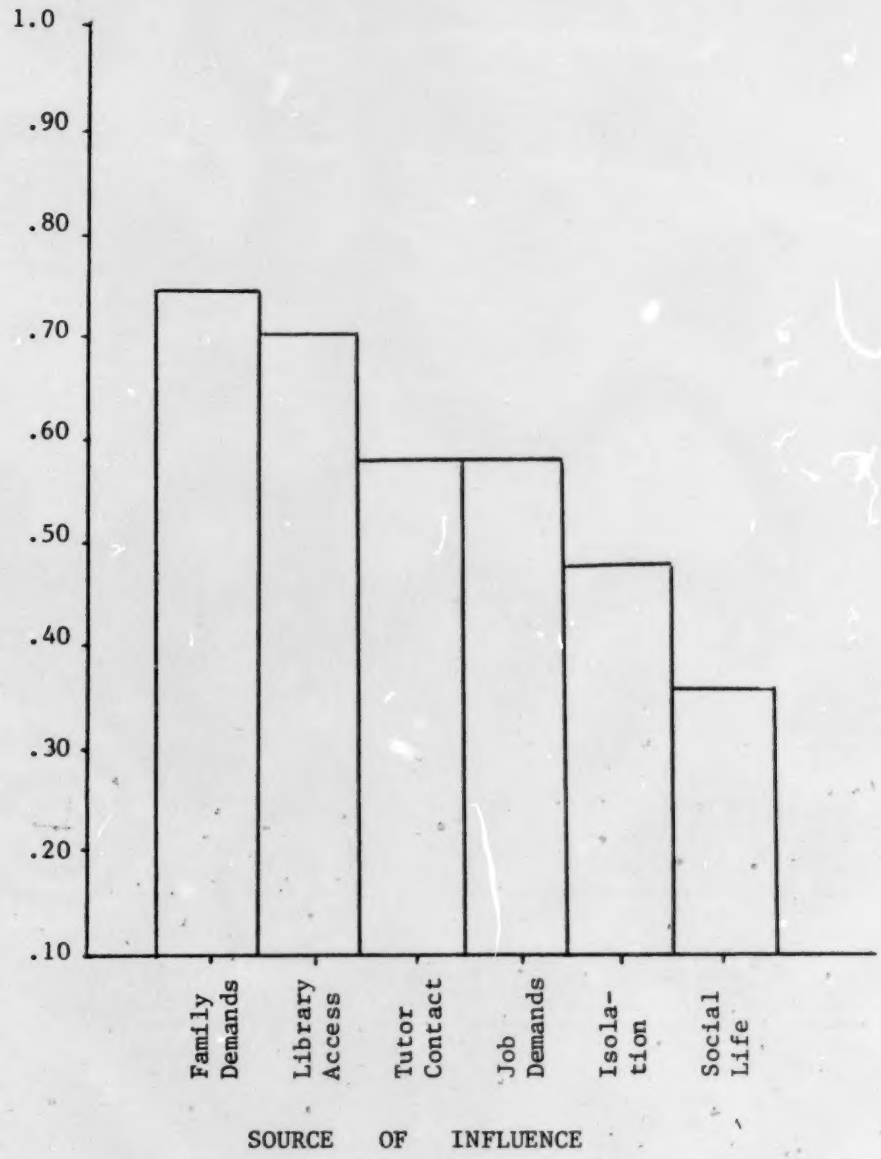

Figure 2 : Proportion of 53 External Students Identifying Six Source of Great or Much Influence on Their Studies

Figure 3: Proportions of 104 Students Specifying Advantage and Disadvantage of External Study for Two Hypothetical Enrolees